

Go to the Zoo

By Jacquelyn Osherow

Though Jacquelyn Osherow does not give regular prompts to her students, she encourages them to go to the zoo and observe the animals just as Rodin encouraged the journeyman poet Rilke to do. Rilke complied, and in the process learned something about the kinetic energy and creaturely sinuousness of animals. Here follows one of Rilke's most famous poems, which grew directly out of his zoo observations:

The Panther

His vision, from the constantly passing bars
has grown so weary that it cannot hold
anything else. It seems to him there are
a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance about a centre
in which a mighty will is paralysed.

Only at times, the curtain of his pupils
lifts quietly. – And image enters in,
rushes down through the tense, arrested muscles
plunges into the heart and is gone.

Translation: Stephen Mitchell